

By Capt. Joe Cleary

It was a Marine's first time to fire the powerful M249 squad automatic weapon, known as the SAW. "Finally," he thought. It was the moment he had been waiting for—what he had signed-up for. He'd had 30 minutes of hands-on training and had passed the Indoor Simulated Marksmanship Trainer (ISMT). He was ready for the real thing—firing live rounds. But was he?

His instructor, a sergeant, gathered the squad for the final brief before beginning their live-fire training. He described the sequence of events, specifically when and where to load their weapons. He told everyone to be careful.

Feeling confident about his brief and the squad's abilities, the instructor told the squad to place their M-16s in condition 3. The Marines carrying the M249 SAWs and M240G

Shouldn't the Head Be Downwind, Not Downrange?

machine guns were told to wait and place their weapons in condition 3 when they reached the ambush site.

While the squad was walking to the ambush site, a snapping sound sliced through the still air. When the SAW gunner had picked his weapon off the ground, he had fired a round into a portable head by the range. Unfortunately, the head wasn't empty. The single round pierced the plastic and tore into a PFC's knees. After being evacuated, he stayed in the hospital for 18 days and lost 28 additional workdays. Most likely, his infantry career was over before it got started.



Cartoon by John Williams

The SAW gunner did not understand the weapon condition codes, despite the hands on training and passing the ISMT. Told to place the machine gun in

condition 3, he didn't realize he was putting the machine gun in condition 1, which was more dangerous.

To make matters worse, while loading, he pointed the weapon in an unsafe direction near another squad.

Sadly, this Marine wasn't the only one who didn't clearly understand what was said in the brief as most of the squad members testified.

Training new Marines is a risky job. Close supervision, rehearsing, keeping the task simple, and having them back-brief are an instructor's best weapons and a student's best armor. ☛

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